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ABSTRACT

Among the major conflicts that have surfaced is the longstanding conflict between faculty and trustees. The first part of this paper summarizes the major findings of the principal areas of possible conflict between these two groups. The data upon which this study is based were collected from national samples of trustees and faculty by means of a mailed questionnaire. The second part of the paper deals with an analysis of, and a proposal for, resolution of the principal area of conflict between trustees and faculty. Given the amount of rhetoric emanating from faculty about trustees, one would expect to find significant differences between these two groups on substantive issues in higher education. However, the data in this study indicate otherwise. (Author/PG)

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Trustee-Faculty Conflict

Leonard DeFiore

Over the past several years it has been fashionable in many circles to find the conventional modes of college and university government no longer viable. Since they are the locus of all legal authority in the institutions, quite naturally the governing boards have been the focus of many of the demands for the reform of higher education. Among the major conflicts which have resurfaced in this connection is the long-standing one between faculty and trustees.

The first part of this paper summarizes the major findings of an empirical study of the principal areas of possible conflict between these two groups. The data upon which this study is based were collected from national samples of trustees and faculty by means of a mailed questionnaire.

The second part of the paper deals with an analysis of, and a proposal for, resolution of the principal area of conflict between trustees and faculty.

Given both the amount and intensity of the rhetoric emanating from faculty about trustees, one would expect to find significant differences between these two groups on substantive issues in higher education. However, the data in this study indicate otherwise. For instance, when one reviews the data comparing the opinions of faculty and trustees on the degree of importance which should be attached to presidential and trustee qualifications, one finds a substantial amount of agreement on almost all criteria. Further, faculty and trustees were found to be in close agreement on the other duties which trustees perform. When faculty opinions on what the role of trustees in decision-making *should be* are compared to what trustees *actually do*, very few differences which would lead to

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conflict occur. On balance, when one reviews the data comparing the opinions of faculty and trustees on the questions of presidential and trustee qualifications and the opinion of faculty on the role trustees play in decision-making, one must conclude that there is much more agreement than is generally suspected. In short, what trustees actually do is not a source of conflict between trustees and faculty.

What, then, causes the conflict between these two groups? At the root of the conflict between them is a fundamental disagreement about who should have major decision-making authority – nakedly put, power – on college and university campuses. The conflict centers on one question: Who shall decide? Tremendous differences exist on two aspects of this question: In what areas should faculty exercise major decision-making authority; and what areas should faculty exercise major decision-making authority; and what areas should be the domain of trustees and/or administrators exclusive of major faculty involvement?

The crucial area of conflict centers on decision-making authority and who should and should not have it. The single most important finding of this study was that the conflict between faculty and trustees lies not in what trustees do but in what they will not let faculty do and the magnitude of differences in this connection. For, as we see in the table below, a majority of the trustees think that faculty should not have major decision-making authority in more than half of the issues considered. This is in stark contrast to the fact that in all but three of the sixteen issues, at least 70 percent of the faculty believe that they should exercise major authority. In short, more often than not, faculty and trustee responses will vary inversely on questions related to who should decide what in American higher education.

The magnitude of differences in this area is such that peaceful resolution of them is all but impossible. On many campuses the struggle power is not on the horizon; it is a fact. Some have suggested that better communication is the answer to the problem. I once was – but am not now – swayed by this argument. Communication is useful in resolving problems of misunderstanding, but what we have here are strong differences which improved communication can do little to resolve.

In what direction, then, does a resolution of this problem lie? It appears to me that the tendency on the part of some might be to attempt to resolve this conflict by the simple expedient of granting more decision-making authority to faculty (and thereby less to trustees and administrators). Before presenting my own thoughts on resolving the problem, it is necessary to deal with this position.

For trustees, it appears that the literature is full of reports commenting upon the remote, the ill-informed, the inexpert, and in other

Table

A Comparison of Trustee and Faculty Opinions on Who Should Have Major Authority in Making Various Decisions
(Percentages)

Decisions	Decision should be made by trustees and/or administrators alone		Decision should be made with faculty exercising major authority	
	Trustees	Faculty	Trustees	Faculty
Appointments:				
President	68	16	29	83
Academic Dean	61	16	36	84
Academics:				
Add or delete courses	14	1	83	99
Add or delete degree programs	29	4	67	96
Admissions criteria	34	11	63	89
Faculty Personnel Matters:				
Professor's Immoral Conduct	62	16	34	80
Tenure Decisions	57	11	39	88
Policy re. Faculty Leaves	56	12	40	88
Student Affairs:				
Rules re. Student Housing	48	18	21	22
Cheating	22	4	64	74
Protests	56	14	34	77
Athletic Program	44	15	39	73
Fraternities	53	12	23	43
Other:				
Commencement Speaker	47	12	42	72
Determine Tuition	92	76	2	15
Honorary Degrees	51	21	42	78
Number of issues on which a majority agree	9	1	4	13

ways inadequate trustee. Calls ranging from reforming to abolishing governing boards abound. It is clear that most students of and many participants in higher education recognize the shortcomings of governing board members and that trustees have a great deal of learning to do before they can begin to do their share in providing the policy and planning leadership so badly needed in American higher education. However, what most people do not have nearly so wide an acquaintanceship with, I fear, are faculty shortcomings in this connection. In order to remedy this situation, therefore, it is necessary to include a brief review of faculty liabilities in decision-making.

Almost all of the textbooks on university management (e.g., Hungate, Corson, Dodds, etc.) tell us that the faculty should have a major role in policy determination in general and should play a primary role in educational matters. Dodds, in his book on the academic presidency, cites two basic advantages to be derived from faculty involvement. The first is political. Involvement in policy determination makes faculty more willing to entrust administrative matters to the administrators. If the faculty are excluded from the former level, they will concentrate attention on minor details as the only way to protect their self-esteem. The fundamental reason, however, is that if a university is to prosper, it must make use of all the intellectual and imaginative talent available.[1]

However reasonable and desirable the above may be in the abstract, the simple fact of the matter is that it does not work very well. Faculties acting as corporate bodies have not made significant contributions in higher education in the area of policy development. This is especially true if we think of policy development in terms of innovation and change. The preponderance of opinion in the literature (Sanford, Rudolph, Riesman, Ruml, Carnegie Commission, etc.) is that faculties have been and continue to be reactionary rather than progressive on educational issues, especially involving change.

The resolution of the conflict, in my opinion, must begin with the reduction on the part of the faculty of their desires for direct decision-making authority. Although it is true that trustees must acknowledge the right of the faculty to be influential in decision-making at various levels and develop effective mechanisms for this purpose, it is the faculty who must begin to recognize and accept their limitations in decision-making. Faculty must understand and accept the limits to their expertise and not attempt to make or even be seriously involved in decisions in areas in which they are not competent. Simply put, a Ph.D. in, say, computer systems or nineteenth-century French literature is not sufficient qualification for institutional, or even broad academic, decision-making. On the other hand, neither should the trustees be involved in any but the broadest policy decisions. Most de-

cisions should be made by a highly trained administrative staff which seeks advice from all constituent groups of the institution. Very briefly stated, the problem of trustee-faculty conflict in the area of decision-making should be resolved by getting the faculty to accept a smaller area of direct authority in decision-making than is evidenced in this study.

However, faculty should still have substantial influence in the decision-making process even in areas in which they are not wholly competent to deal with directly or which are too complicated to be dealt with collegially. They should have influence in several ways but principally through meaningful participation in the selection of key administrative personnel. In addition, at the college level faculty should continue to be represented by their department chairman and at the university level by the dean of their college and by representatives on some university-wide body such as a senate.

What is the likelihood of this occurring, i.e., faculty either voluntarily or otherwise being less involved in decision-making? That they will not willingly surrender their prerogatives or desires in this area under present circumstances is almost a certainty. However, circumstances may be on the horizon which will weaken the rather secure position which faculty have enjoyed of late. The supply-demand ratio as evidenced, for example, in *The Academic Marketplace* is being eroded, thereby undermining the mobility, hence, the independence of academicians. Such factors as the present serious financial squeeze at most institutions, the slackening of the enrollment growth rate, and the sharp rise in the number of Ph.D.'s are likely to further weaken the position of faculty in higher education and make shifts in the balance of power at their expense more likely.

But, then, who should make decisions? I would answer, administrators. The rationale for the position that administrators be entrusted with most decision-making is that they have the least serious handicaps to competent performance in this area. The administrator is less likely to have his judgement clouded by vested interests, as do faculty, or remoteness, as do trustees. Additionally, administrators can bring to bear a wider range of experience, an institutional level point of view, and greater intensity of attention to a given problem because the welfare of the institution is their primary responsibility, whereas for faculty and trustees it is a secondary concern at best. Each of them has other primary roles to play.

But, to say that administrators are simply the least bad of possible alternatives is not the only argument that can be advanced to support this position. In commenting on this subject, Professor Cowley has indicated that he could demonstrate a relationship between powerful administrative leadership and institutional eminence.[2] In addition, Professor Trippit has written: "One

of the deadliest sins in higher education is inertia. . . . If I read the history of American higher education correctly, it seems to me that more often than not the safeguards against this hazard have been found, not in the autonomy of faculties, but in the greater strength which has been accorded college administrators in this country. . . ."[3]

Yet, it must be admitted that these statements are not overwhelming in their support of my position. The core of the problem, I believe, is that administrators need to be of a new and better sort than heretofore. No longer should administrators be chosen almost solely or even primarily from faculty ranks. To continue such practices, for instance, as the appointment of assistant deans from among those faculty who fail to gain tenure, or senior administrators from faculty whose research productivity is substantially ended is to perpetuate much of the mediocrity which now passes for administration. Rather, I suggest that administrators should be people who have chosen this particular profession, who have been trained for it, and how are temperamentally suited for the types of tasks involved.

Higher educational institutions need to develop formal personnel programs which will recruit, select, train, and allocate administrative personnel, will be responsible for rational administrative planning, and will assess the potential and performance of incumbents. What is needed is a planned administrative personnel system which will produce competent administrators. Possibly when administrators are obviously competent most faculty will feel more comfortable with less direct control of the decision-making process. Many faculty are probably aware, at least subconsciously, of their limitations in college and university administration and decision-making, but they are also perceptive enough to be unwilling to entrust these powers to the kind of administrators which presently predominate. A more competent group of administrators might, in time, win the confidence of the faculty and they might subsequently relax their desire to play an active and direct role in the decision-making process.

Any developments of this kind, if at all, are far in the future. At present, the struggle for decision-making authority on campuses will continue to be a major problem – the differences of opinion on this matter are so great as to preclude anything short of a major struggle on most campuses.

NOTES

[1]Harold W. Dodds, *The Academic President–Educator or Caretaker?* New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1962.

[2]W. H. Cowley, "Some Myths About Professors, Presidents, and Trustees," *Teachers College Record*, 64 (November 1962), 159-171.

[3]J. Trippit, "The Role of Faculties in Administration," A.A.U.P. *Bulletin*, 43 (September 1957), 484-491.